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ENTITLED The Effect of Perspective on Attributions Over Time

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The Effect of Perspective on Attributions Over Time

By

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Abstract

The effect of perspective on causal attributions as a function of time was examined. University of Illinois Psychology 100 students (44 females and 39 males) rated themselves and a close friend in each of three time focuses: past, present, and future. For each target in each time frame, subjects chose a point on a continuum between a pair of polar-opposite personality traits or a "depends on the situation" option for twenty sets of traits. The actor-observer effect was replicated. Additionally, actors judgements in the past and future were similar to observers judgements in the present. Both actors and observers were more dispositional in the past and future. The pattern of results supports the hypothesis that the actor-observer difference is the result of perspective.

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People draw different conclusions from the same situations. If a University of Illinois student, sitting on the Quad on a sunny afternoon sees a young man approach a young woman and ask her for a date, which she bluntly declines, the observing student and the young woman might have two different explanations of the situation. The young woman may feel that she was only trying to discourage someone whom she had politely refused several times, while the observing student may conclude that the woman is rude. A student who receives an unexpected "A" on an exam might claim that she was simply lucky; she had studied the section of her class notes that the exam had emphasized by chance. Her roommate, on the other hand, might conclude that her intelligent roommate had once again demonstrated her academic talent.

The phenomenon called the "actor-observer difference" is the tendency for people to attribute their own behavior to the situation that surrounds them and to attribute the behavior of someone else to the other's personality. In situations such as psychological therapy the difference in attributions could have an important effect. While a therapist might focus on the client's personal characteristics,

the client might focus on his surroundings. Because the attribution process affects so many areas of our lives, psychologists have spent a good deal of time trying to find out not only how attributions are different, but how different factors affect them.

In this paper, I will focus on how perspective affects attribution. I shall review how the actor-observer hypothesis was first developed and then discuss studies explain how visual perspective affects attributions by actors and observers. Finally, in the last section, I shall discuss how time affects attributions. Three explanations of the actor-observer effect are discussed in length. All subsequent research discussed in this review uses one or more of the three theories to explain data collected.

The Original Studies on the Actor-Observer Difference

Perceived amount of choice and the actor-observer difference. The original Jones and Harris (1967) study involved only observers. Subjects rated actor's true opinions on topics which actors had varying amounts of freedom to choose the position they defended. The effect of perceived amount of choice on observer's inferences about the actors opinion was examined. In the first experiment in this study, subjects read essays that they were told were written as

answers to political science exams. Some of the essays defensed of Castro's Cuba, and the rest opposed. Subjects were told either that the essay writer could choose a position to defend or that the writer had been assigned a position to defend. In a second experiment, subjects read essays that they were told had been taken from opening statements of debates. Again, the position on Cuba and what the subject was told about the amount of choice the writer had were manipulated. In a third experiment, subjects were told that they were listening to speeches on segregation given by paid subjects in a psychology experiment who were either given free choice in deciding which side of the issue to defend or were assigned a position to advocate.

Even when observers were told that the target had not chosen the side of the argument, and even when the side defended was relatively unlikely to be defended, the observers used the position argued as an index of the target's true opinion. In other words, the subjects attributed the actions of the actors to personal factors, even in a situation where the apparent situational factors influencing their actions were constraining. Subjects had been told that the essay writer been assigned a side to argue, and were writing for a grade. Even under these constraints, the subjects who read essays favoring Castro judged the true

attitude of the writer to be congruent to the position asserted in the essay.

This experiment was not a direct study of the effect of actor or observer roles on attributions, but Jones and Nisbett (1971) used its data to support their hypothesis of the actor-observer difference. The subjects believed that the essays and speeches represented the actors' true opinions, when information that the target had no choice in choosing which position to defend. Jones and Nisbett believed that this demonstrates the observers' tendencies to make dispositional attributions.

The original actor-observer difference study. In a series of three experiments, Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, and Marecek (1973) produced the actor-observer difference in three different situations. The first experiment involved actors and observers who made inferences about actors' reasons for volunteering, the second examined attributions for choosing a girlfriend and major, and the third required actors and observers to describe the target's personality in dispositional or situational terms.

College women who believed they were participating in an experiment on decision making were asked to make a "real" decision before the experiment began. The actor subject and two confederates were then asked to volunteer, for a small wage, to host the wives of financial backers of a program

that researched ways to assist the underprivileged and minority groups. Both of the confederates always volunteered, and the actor subject was always asked after the two confederates had been asked. Actors and observers were then asked to make attributions for the actors willingness to volunteer (in the trials where the actor did not volunteer, observers were questioned about one of the confederates) and to predict the degree to which the actor would be likely to canvass for the United Fund. Although the amount of money offered did have an effect on the actor's willingness to volunteer, answers to questions asked following the experiment indicated that neither actors nor observers considered the money to be an important factor in determining the decision to volunteer. Observers were more likely to predict that volunteers would canvass for United Fund.

In the second experiment in the Nisbett et al. study, male undergraduates were asked to write six short paragraphs. In the first two paragraphs, the subject described why he dated the woman he dated most frequently and why he had chosen his major. Subjects described why their best friends had chosen their majors and girlfriends in the next two paragraphs. Lastly, subjects were asked to write paragraphs <u>as if</u> they were their best friend describing the subject's choice of major and girlfriend. The responses in

the paragraphs were then coded as, entity (situational), dispositional or entity/dispositional reasons.

The actors gave roughly twice as many entity reasons as dispositional reasons for choosing their girlfriend. When explaining choice of major, the observers were more likely to explain the choice in terms of the target's disposition. In the final part of this study, subjects described their own personality, as well as the personalities of four other targets, by indicating which of three choices most accurately described the target person, on 20 trials. A trait, its polar opposite and the phrase "depends on the situation" were the available choices. The measure of attributional tendency was the number of trait descriptions chosen for each target. This technique revealed a difference between the actors and observers in number of trait descriptions used to describe the target.

Jones and Nisbett's explanations. In a 1971 review, Jones and Nisbett proposed three explanations of the actor-observer difference. The first explanation, the difference in information available to the actor and observer, assumes that actors have more available information on which to base their judgments. Secondly, Jones and Nisbett suggested the information processes of actors may be different from those of observers. Finally, there are possible motivational reasons for actors to attribute their actions to the situation.

Jones and Nisbett discussed cited cause data, effect data, and historical data as types of information on which actors and observers may have different amounts of information. They argued that only with cause data, information about the causes leading to the observed behavior, can observer's knowledge approach the knowledge of actors. While noting that actors and observers could have nearly equal information, they argued that actors usually have more information about the circumstances surrounding the actions of the actor. For example, if Gina trips Joel and Jan observes the encounter, Gina may know that Joel had committed a series of unprovoked assaults against her, and that she tripped him for this reason while Jan does not have this information. Gina will attribute her actions to the situation (Joel's assault), while Jan attributes Gina's actions to her personal tendency to be hateful.

Effect data include information about what was done, the outcomes of the action, and the actor's emotional reactions to the situation. Jones and Nisbett note that actors and observers can have equal information on the action and outcomes of the situation (Gina tripped Joel and Joel became angry), but that the only information that observers have on the actor's reaction to the situation is information obtained indirectly. Observers can base their attributions on how they would have reacted in the same situation, or on

inferences they make from the actor's verbalizations and paralinguistic cues.

Finally, Jones and Nisbett point out that observers may base their attributions partly on their assumptions about people in general, while actors have access to their particular life history. Jones and Nisbett suggest differences in these three types of information might lead to the more situational attributions made by actors, but differences in available information could also lead to more dispositional attributions by actors (Monson and Snyder 1977).

Jones and Nisbett discuss motivational influences affecting actor as a second explanation of the actor-observer difference. They hypothesize that reactance, Brehm's (1966) theory of human response to threatened freedoms, influences the actor-observer difference. According to this hypothesis, "The perception of freedom is probably best maintained by simultaneously ascribing traits to others and denying them in oneself" (Jones and Nisbett, 1971, p.92). In other words, ascribing traits to others makes observers feel that they can predict other's behavior while others cannot predict their behavior, because they cannot be described by trait descriptions (their behavior depends on the situation). According to this explanation, the actor-observer difference allows subjects to feel more free. However, it is not clear that the need to be "free" would

lead actors to situational attributions. If one's behavior is determined by the situation rather than personal disposition, are they really "free"?

A second type of motivational influence is "the motive to maintain or enhance one's self esteem" (Jones and Nisbett, 1971, p.92). If actors consider the actions about which attributions are being undesirable, they will attribute their behavior to the situation, and if the behavior is considered desirable, actors will attribute their behavior their personal dispositions. The observer will make dispositional attributions for desirable behavior if the observer already has a favorable opinion of the actor, and the observer will make situational attributions for undesirable behavior if the observer has a negative opinion of the actor. The authors note that the actor-observer difference is probably not completely the result of motivational factors since there are a variety of motivational factors that could be influential that predict opposite results.

Finally, differences in information processing could affect attributions made by actors and observers. Jones and Nisbett (1971) assert that the actions of the actor, in contrast to the features of the relatively stable environment, are more dynamic and therefore more salient to the observer. The actor's position is not advantageous to observing his or her behavior. Visually, the observer is in a much better

position to observe the actor's behavior. The actor's attention is usually directed outward towards the surrounding situational elements to which the actor reacts. Additionally, actors are usually focusing on aspects of the situations (i.e. other people) rather than concentrating their mental energy on their personal disposition. Therefore, the observer processes more information about the actor, while the actor processes more information about the environment.

The Effect of Visual Perspective on Attributions

In Manet's masterpiece, "A Bar at the Folies Bergere"(see Appendix 1), show how visual perspective can alter attributions people make for other's behavior. When looking at the young barmaid full-face, one might assume that her expression reflects boredom or fatigue that. The same painting allows a different perspective. Looking at the reflection in the mirror, one discovers that the barmaid is looking into the stern face of a man. This new visual information may lead to different attributions for the woman's facial expressions: perhaps the man is a causal agent in the woman's mood.

Several experiments have attempted to alter perspective various ways to study the effects on attributions.

The Storms Experiment

In an innovative experiment, Storms (1973) changed the visual perspective of actors who performed a "getting-acquainted" task and observer subjects who watched the interaction. The task involved only actor subjects who were introduced to another subject and instructed to spend a few minutes getting to know each other. Each interaction was observed by two subjects who had been assigned to observe one of the actors. By videotaping the conversations from two different camera angles, Storms provided four experimental treatments. The actor-same and observer-same subjects viewed a videotape that was filmed from their original point of view. The observer-new subjects saw a videotape of the person whom they were not originally instructed to observe. The actor-new subjects saw a tape made from the point of view of the person with whom they had interacted. In a control condition no videotape was shown, and the subject was asked only to fill out questionnaires following the taping of the interaction.

Storms reproduced the actor-observer difference in the actor-same and observer-same conditions. The actor-observer effect was <u>reversed</u> in the actor-new and observer-new conditions. The actors were more situational in their evaluations in the original point of view and the control conditions, but in the video reorientation condition, they were relatively more dispositional. The observers, who were more

dispositional in the same orientation and control conditions, were more situational in the reorientation condition.

Storms discussed the two differences between actors and observers in terms of the Jones and Nisbett hypotheses. First, Storm's considered a difference in information available to actors and observers, focusing on effect data, that is, data about the event itself. With effect data, Jones and Nisbett argue actors and observers can have "equivalent information about the nature of the act and about environmental outcomes." (Jones and Nisbett 1971, p.84). Storms also considered Jones and Nisbett theory that there are differences in the way the information is processed. Storms combined these two hypotheses as a "point of view" or "perspective" explanation, to explain his results. Storms argues that visual information influences which aspects of the situation are salient and therefore affects how the information is processed and how attributions are made.

This study demonstrated that some of the conditions Jones and Nisbett hypothesized lead to differences in attributions were not necessary to produce the actor-observer difference. What about the cause data and the historical data? According to Jones and Nisbett, the difference in attributions made by actors and observers is partially caused by observer's informations deficits in these types of data. Storms' results are not in accordance with Jones and Nisbett.

He reverses the actor observer effect by reversing only the visual information available to the actor and observer, while the cause and historical data are not manipulated. Additionally, Jones and Nisbett's hypothesis of a difference in information processing is fundamentally different from Storm's. While Storms discusses visual salience as the cause of processing differences, Jones and Nisbett discuss information processing as a much more cognitive entity and include arguments about "egocentric biases". Storms' experiment supports his perspective hypothesis, but not the more cognitive hypothesis of Jones and Nisbett in explaining the different attributional patterns of actors and observers. Storms was able to manipulate attributions made by actors and observers using only the visual reorientation. Therefore, it might be concluded that the actor observer difference is not the result of informational deficits and egocentric biases, but is the result of differences in perspective.

The Regan and Totten Reply

Regan and Totten (1975) attempted to reverse the actor-observer difference without manipulating the visual information available to either the actor or the observer. The experiment involved only observers, observers that they attempted to turn into actors.

Regan and Totten (1975) showed 40 subjects a video tape of two students involved in a "getting acquainted task."

While half of the subjects were given standard "observer" instructions [such as those used by Jones and Nisbett (1971)] for observing the assigned target, half received instructions modeled after Stotland's (1969) "imagine him" instructions. The empathic "imagine him " instructions were as follows:

> While you are watching this "get acquainted" conversation, please try to empathize with Margret, the girl on the left side of the screen. Imagine how Margret feels as she engages in the conversation. While you are watching the tape, picture to yourself just how she feels in the situation. You are to concentrated on the way she feels while conversing. Think about her reaction to the information she is receiving from the conversation. In your mind's eye, you are to visualize how it feels to Margret to be in this conversation. After the tape is over, you will be asked about Margret's behavior.
> (Regan and Totten, 1975, p. 852-853)

Half of the subjects saw a standard videotape and half saw a tape in which only the target person was shown, although both participants could be heard. The videotape manipulation cross-cut the instruction manipulation, so four cells were created. Subjects were asked to make situational and dispositional attributions for four behaviors. The experimenters predicted that the empathic observers would provide more situational attributions than the normal observers, because they would utilize a cognitive set more like that of actors. Regan and Totten included the videotape manipulation to determine whether the empathic instructions were simply directing the subject's visual attention toward the other participant.

They did not want the observers to simply adopted the visual perspective of the actor subjects in Jones and Nisbett (1971) study. Therefore, an effect in the cell where empathic observers could see only the target subject would support their theory that the actor observer effect is influenced by the way the information is processed.

The empathic observers were more situational in their attributions for the target's behavior than the standard observers. A closer investigation of the results does present some difficulty for the Regan and Totten theory. The effect of empathic instructions was not significant in the two-person, standard video-tape condition. The effect was significant in the one-person videotape condition. Regan and Totten (1975) do not even mention this effect of visual perspective on attributions. The empathic instructions manipulation did not produce significance in the standard videotape condition. Further investigation into how the visual orientation affects attributions is needed because cells in which the videotape manipulation was used were the only ones that yielded significant results. Finally, a check for subject's perception of the empathic instructions should have been made. Because the subjects had no previous experience with Margret, trying to empathize with her was probably based on past similar experiences of their own. It is important to know whether subjects really responded to

the instructions by imagining that they were Margret, or whether, because of lack of information about Margret, they responded to the questionnaires as they would respond if they were Margret. If subjects answered the questionnaires as they would respond if they were Margret, they would picture themselves in the situation Margret was in and respond as they would in that situation, as an actor. Subjects who imagined themselves as Margret provide valid data for Regan and Totten's hypothesis, but subjects responding as themselves in the situation Margret is in do not. Therefore, the Regan and Totten experiment does not diminish the possible importance of the effect of visual perspective in the attributions that subjects make in the "getting acquainted" exercise.

The effects of visual perspective generalize to more important everyday situations. Studies of causality, such as Lassiter and Irvine (1986) (see also Taylor, Crocker, Fiske, Springer, and Winbler, 1979, and Taylor and Fiske, 1975) have shown how the point of view from which a videotape is filmed affects people's causal attributions. Lassiter and Irvine (1986) found that visual perspective had a significant effect on subject's attributions for a confession to a crime. Those subjects who saw the back of the suspect and the front of the detective were most likely to explain the confession as coercion by the detective. Sub-

jects who saw the front of the suspect and the back of the detective were least likely to accept the confession as resulting from the disposition of the suspect. Because it is becoming more common for videotaped confessions to be shown to jurors, this experiment shows how video camera angles could seriously effect jury decisions.

The Effect of Time on Attributions

During my first year of high school, I won the part of the romantic lead in the fall play. Opening night was full of anticipation and excitement. All was well until it was time for the kiss. Because the young man who had the part of my beau, Alan, was my best friend's older brother, and my best friend was also in the play, he had never actually kissed me. This added to the butterflies that I already had. The kiss was staged on a flight of stairs and involved a dip. I spoke my last line, Alan tried to dip me, but I lost my balance and fell down the stairs. I blamed the fall on everything from the shoes that I was wearing to the carpeting on the stairs, but never on myself. As time went by, I realized that most likely I fell down the stairs due to my nervousness and lack of grace. As time went by, the way I viewed the incident changed.

This is often the case. Passage of time is another way to change the perspective of actor and observers. Many

attempts have been made to find consistencies in the way that dispositional and situational attributions stabilize or alter as time passes, but the results have been quite disappointing. Moore, Sherrod, Lui, and Underwood (1979) found that actors' attributions became more dispositional over time. Miller and Porter (1980) found that situational factors became more important to actors as time passed. Funder and Van Ness (1983) attempted to explain the conflicting results as the result of comparing a repeated measures design with an independent groups design; they found that only in the independent groups design did any difference over time occur at all. Burger and Huntzinger (1985) and Burger (1983) explored the effects of success on explanations by actors and observers over time. Attributions changed over time as a function of perceived amount of success.

The Moore et al. study. Actors made three minute tapes describing themselves that they were told would be interpreted by students at another college. Half of the subjects filled out questionnaires similar to those used in Storms' 1973 experiment that inquired about perceived level of friendliness, nervousness, talkativeness, and assertiveness. In addition, dispositional and situational attributions for these four behaviors were reported by subjects on the questionnaires. The other half of the subjects returned approx-

imately three weeks later and filled out the same questionnaires.

A small tendency was found for actors to become more dispositional in their attributions over time, for three of the four behaviors. Because the behavior that did not show a significance effect can be considered negative (nervousness), the experimenters suggested that the shift might be a motivational one. Actors attribute favorable actions to their consistent traits over time. No favorability ratings were obtained on the behaviors, so it is not possible to evaluate this hypothesis with these data. Perhaps assertiveness or talkativeness were not considered highly favorable traits by these subjects. The experimenters noted that the data from this experiment did not strongly support their hypothesis. They moved on to study the dispositional shift in another context.

Subjects were involved in a "getting acquainted" exercise, in groups of four. Two actors were randomly assigned to engage in a five minute conversation, and each was observed by an observer subject. The attribution questionnaires were the same as those used in the first experiment. A group of control subjects (N=48) was divided into three groups, and each group was assigned a recall set prior to the administration of the questionnaire. One group was instructed to remember responses of the target and how those

responses were probably viewed by the other actor (Dispositional Recall). Another group was asked to focus on aspects of the situation (Situational Recall), and the third group was not instructed to focus on any particular aspect (Neutral Recall). These subjects were then released from the experiment. All of the other subjects filled out the attribution questionnaire and left. Three weeks later, the 72 subjects in the experimental group returned to the lab, and were divided into the same groups as the control subjects. Following the recall manipulation, subjects filled out attribution questionnaire and were released from the experiment. The second experiment provided evidence that the hypothesized positivity bias (motivational explanation) did not affect attributions over time, because all subjects rated the actors as less friendly after time had passed and actors rated themselves as less assertive. Again, the actors became more situational over time while the observers remained relatively stable. Finally, while actors had no trouble recalling dispositional details, they did have some trouble remembering details about the situation.

Although the experimenters concluded that people's self perception may be "an artifact of information processing over time" (p. 568), Funder (1983, p.20) points out that the results of Moore et al. did not fully support this conclusion, because the results did not reveal any relationship

between the decrease in situational attributions and memory for situational details.

___ Miller and Porter's conflicting results. Miller and Porter examined how attributions change over time by conducting four experiments that investigated subjects' inductions from outcomes of different events. Present and past parent/child arguments, an anagrams test, the Prisoner's Dilemma game, and two person debates were the situations for the study. Miller and Porter concluded that actors' attributions get more situational as time passes and that the differences between actors' and observers' attributions narrow as the amount of time between the event and the judgment increases.

In the study of parent/child arguments, half of the subjects listed the most common arguments they currently have with their parents and rated the amount of responsibility that they attribute to themselves and to their parents for the arguments. Subjects also were asked to judge how typical the arguments were of other people their age and their parents and how inevitable the arguments were. The remainder of the subjects reported the same things for arguments that had occurred when they were 16. Subjects felt the responsibility for the arguments was equal in both conditions, but that both parents and children were less

responsible and the arguments were more typical and more inevitable in the past.

More direct information about attributions over time was gathered in the second experiment, in which menstruating women received feedback on their performance on an anagrams exam. After completing the task and receiving their scores, half of the subjects used seven-point scales to indicate the degree to which luck, ability, and effort had determined their performance. Questions also asked subjects about the role of their period in determining their score, as well as how similar they thought their performance would be to other menstruating women and how they would perform on future tasks. The other half of the subjects completed the same questionnaire 7-10 days after the task.

The only two factors that differed over time were task difficulty and role that the subject's period had in determining performance. In each case, the factor was accorded more responsibility in the delayed condition. Were Miller and Porter correct in inferring that the subjects viewed their behavior as the consequence of less personal factors as time passed? One important result that is not discussed by the experimenters is that the dispositional attributions (effort and ability importance) showed high ratings in both conditions. Although the highest rating (on a seven point scale) in the delayed condition was given to the role of the

test (4.06), it does not seem to differ significantly from the ratings of effort (3.83) or ability (3.94). The experimenters did not report whether or not the factors were significantly different.

In the third study, actors and observers made attributions for the results of trials of the Prisoner's Dilemma game. Only one actor/observer pair was involved in each trial, and the responses of the other competitor were given by the experimenter. Each actor and observer was placed in an experimental room alone, with an intercom through which they could speak to the experimenter, but not to each other. The experimenter could communicate with both subjects. The actor reported his responses to the experimenter and received the responses of the other player from the experimenter through the intercom. The observer heard the responses of both players from the experimenter through the intercom. All subjects were given a sheet to record all responses of both players. The first response of the nonexistent player was randomly assigned and after that, the experimenter reported the second player's response as the N-1 response of the actor. After 30 trials, half of the actors and observers filled out questionnaires which asked them to rate how much interaction between the players and the situation had determined the outcome of the game. The remaining subjects filled out the same questionnaire half an hour later.

Differences were found between the amount of responsibility attributed to the two players and the situation by actors and observers in the immediate condition. While actors attributed more responsibility to the players, observers attributed more responsibility to the situation. The situation was viewed as less causal by all subjects in the immediate condition. No significant difference was found between actors and observers in their attributions in the delayed condition.

The final study required subjects to debate an assigned position on capital punishment. Following the debate, subjects were told that they would debate again with another partner in the second session or that they would analyze the debates of others. Half of the subjects then filled out questionnaires asking them to indicate the amount of influence their ability, effort and preparation, and the side of the issue that they argued had in determining their behavior. When the subjects in the delayed condition arrived approximately a week later, they were reminded of the task they had been assigned and were then given the same questionnaire as the other subjects.

Subjects did not differ significantly in the amount of importance they assigned to ability in any of the four conditions. Those subjects who did not expect to debate again assigned more importance to the side of the issue argued and

less importance to their preparation and effort than did those who expected to debate again. For those who did not expect to debate again, the issue was given a higher importance rating in the delayed condition and effort and preparation were emphasized less in the no delay condition. No effects of delay were found for subjects who expected to debate again. The experimenters concluded that when motivation is kept high by indicating that another debate will follow, the attributions are more like those made originally in the no delay condition.

Miller and Porter (1980) concluded that as time passes, the attributions of actors become more like the attributions of observers, because the motivation to see oneself as in control of the situation decreases over time.

The effect of memory on attributions over time. Funder and Van Ness involved subjects in a "getting acquainted" exercise like the one used by Moore et al. (1979), but added a few new twists. To judge whether or not attributions became more accurate over time due to subject's increased ability to understand events (Miller and Porter (1980), the experimenters introduced agreement ratings of the actual behaviors as an indirect measure of the accuracy of the behavior. Inter-rater agreement scores were obtained from behavior ratings of the actor, observer, and two experimenters for each actor/observer pair. Because one of the Moore

et al. (1979) experiments had used a repeated assessment, and the Miller and Porter study (1980) used independent groups, Funder and Van Ness used both designs. The subjects in the repeated assessments group filled out a questionnaire that asked them to rate how friendly, nervous, talkative, and assertive they were. Subjects were also asked to choose a scale value for how important characteristics of the situation and personal characteristics were for causing them to act the way they did, for each of the four behaviors. All subjects returned three weeks later and filled out the attribution questionnaire, the repeated assessment group for the second time and the postponed assessment group for the first time.

Surprisingly, no difference between actors and observers was found in the attributions made. The subjects in the postponed assessment group became more situational and less dispositional over time, while the repeated measures group tended to be relatively less situational. The experimenters concluded that attributions are less reliable as time goes by. Although this study did not find an actor observer difference, it does tell us something about design influences. In addition, experimenters may learn something from the task that was given to the subjects. It is possible that the five minute conversation was not very memorable, and that could account for the subject's inability to remember

aspects of the situation over a period of three weeks. Perhaps a more memorable or longer interaction would increase the memory for events. The experiment does not provide enough evidence to conclude that changes in peoples' attributions over time are always based on loss of poor memory for the event.

Time and task outcome. Another possible explanation for a difference in attributions over time is task outcome. Burger and Huntzinger (1984) found that subjects who were successful on a skills-assessment test made more dispositional attributions over time, while the less successful made more situational attributions. Burger (1985) found similar results for subjects who made attributions for performance on a midterm. He concluded that the difference in attributions was due to self-serving biases, but this explanation fails to explain why the actor-observer difference and changes in attributions over time occur when there the task does not involve success or failure, as in a "getting acquainted" activity.

Another look at attributions over time. Although the research on changes in attributions over time has been inconclusive, another attempt was made to demonstrate how perspective, as a function of time, affects attributions. In addition to asking subjects to make judgements about past

behaviors, subjects were asked about future behavior. The future should have the same effect on perspective as the past. As actors look ahead, they probably adopt an observer-like perspective, similar to the perspective they adopt when rating past experiences.

For each of twenty pairs of traits, subjects described the target by choosing a point on a continuum between the polar-opposite traits, or by choosing a "depends on the situation" option. Subjects were asked to rate themselves and a close friend with each of three focuses: present, three years past, and five years ahead.

The change of focus, whether to the past or to the future, should lead to more dispositional attributions by both actors and observers. Actors have the opportunity to distance themselves from the situation and look at how they affected or will affect the interaction. As observers think about the past or future, the actor, who is the most salient feature of interactions in the present, becomes even more salient, especially in comparison to the less striking features of the environment.

Method

Eighty-three University of Illinois undergraduates, 44 females and 39 males, who were enrolled in an introductory

psychology class participated in a study as part of a class requirement. Similar to a study performed by Nisbett et al. (1973), subjects were asked to describe themselves and their closest friend that they had known for more than three years using a series of questionnaires. For each questionnaire, the subject was asked to describe the target by either circling a number between a pair of polar-opposite traits for each of twenty trait pairs, or circling a "D" to indicate that the subject could be better described by the phrase "depends on the situation" than by any point on the continuum. The "depends on the situation" option was placed to the left of the continuum for each trait pair. The subject described each target in each of three time frames or focuses. Subjects described the target as they were at the time the questionnaires were answered, as they were three years in the past, and as the subject thought they would be five years in the future. The questionnaires were presented to each subject in a random order to control for order effects. The twenty traits used were the same as those used in the Nisbett et al.(1973) study with the exception of the "serious-gay" pair. Due to current usage of the word "gay", the pair was replaced with "serious-fun-loving", as it was in a later

study by Funder (1980). For a full list of traits, see the appendix.

Results

As expected, actors were more dispositional than observers ($F=10.73$, df 1, $p<.002$). This finding replicates the actor-observer difference found in previous research. However, temporal focus also affected attributions ($F=11.90$, df 1, $p<.002$). Although both actors and observers were more dispositional in the past and the future, when you compare the attributions of actors in different time frames to the attributions of actors and observers in the present (see table one), they seem very similar. Specifically, table two shows that the mean difference between actors and observers in the present ($t=2.28$, df 82, $p<.025$) is about the same as the differences between actors in present and three years ago ($t=3.39$, df 82, $p<.001$), and actors in the present and five years in the future ($t=1.67$ df 82 $p<.099$). When the means are studied in this way, the effect of focus on attributions looks like the actor observer effect. It is clear that more than temporal focus is responsible for producing the actor-observer effect; there was no interac-

Table 1

Mean Numbers of Trait Used to Describe Target with Each Focus

	Focus			
Target	Past	Present	Future	Mean
Actors	18.86	18.14	18.49	18.50
Observers	19.30	18.66	18.88	18.69
Mean	19.08	18.40	18.69	

Table 2

Mean Differences Between Target by Focus Cells

Target	Actor			Observer		
by Focus	Past	Present	Future	Past	Present	Future
Actor						
Past						
Present	.71***					
Future	.36*	.35*				
Observer						
Past	.45**	1.16***	.81***			
Present	.19	.52**	.17	.64***		
Future	.02	.73***	.39**	.42**	.27	

*p<.10. **p<.05. ***p<.001.

tion between the actor-observer effect and the focus effect ($F=.15$, df 2, $p<.860$).

Discussion

The main hypothesis of this study, that actors using a time frame other than the present will make more dispositional attributions, is supported. This adds support to the theory that the divergent attributions made by actors and observers are the result of their different perspectives.

Change in perspective allows the actor the chance to see how personality affects his or her behavior. Because neither actors nor observers have information about the future, it would seem unlikely that the dispositional shift in the future condition is the result of differences in information. Additionally, no one has memories of the future, so this shift does not result from memory bias. Furthermore, the attributions made by actors in the past and future are similar to those made by observers in the present. This indicates that it is possible that when actors use a perspective other than the present, they are more like observers. Storms' (1973) visual perspective change had the same affect that the focus manipulation had.

Although there is no interaction between target and focus, a few interpretations of data that still support the main hypothesis are possible. Perhaps a stronger manipulation of altering the perspective of the subjects is needed. If subjects had been guided through some reflection time before making judgements about the past and some projection time before making future judgements, maybe information to base these judgements on would have been more available. Judging from the very short amount of time that many of the subjects used to fill out all of the questionnaire, it is possible that some did not take much time to think about the target in the instructed time period.

While observers are already more distanced from the judgements than actors, it seems that the focus effect affects them in the same way that it affects actors; that is, they become even more distanced. It has been shown that the actor was more salient in the present conditions (hence more dispositional attributions), and the results indicate that the focus manipulation makes the actor even more salient to them and leads to judgements that are even more dispositional. Because both actors and observers become more dispositional, the interaction is not significant.

Thus, it seems that our judgements about our present behavior are influenced by the disadvantageous position that we are in to observe the whole situation. It is difficult to see just how much our personalities affect how we deal with current interactions. As we later reflect on the interaction, or think about future interactions, we are more likely to see our influence on the environment and less likely to see the environments influence on us.

Footnotes

1 Although it is not possible to determine whether or not these differences are significant from the reported statistics, it is interesting to note that the smallest reported difference that obtained significance was .43. A difference of .22 (just .01 smaller than the difference between 4.06 and 3.94) did not obtain significance.

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Appendix 2: Instructions and Questionnaire

INSTRUCTIONS

On the following questionnaires, you will be asked to describe yourself or a friend that you have known for at least six years. You will be asked to describe each person four times: once for each of four different times in the person's life. For each pair of traits listed, you will be asked to choose a number on a six point continuum that best represents the person's personality. If you feel that the person's positions on the continuum varies according to the situation they are in, you have the option of marking "D", which stands for "depends on the situation".

For example, the first pair of traits you are asked to consider is "serious or fun-loving". If you feel the word "serious" better describes the person under consideration, circle one of the three numbers closer to the word "serious". The closer to the word "serious" the number is, the more serious you consider the person to be. If you feel the person can be more accurately described by the "fun-loving", pick one of the three numbers closer to the word "fun-loving". Again, the closer the number is to the word "fun-loving", the more strongly you feel the word "fun-loving" applies. If you feel the person falls between the two extremes, circle a number close to the center. If you feel a description of the person depends upon the situation they are in at the time, circle "D" for "depends on the situation".

Please answer all of the item on each questionnaire in this manner. Thank you.

EXAMPLE:

DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SERIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	FUN-LOVING
				<-->				

Please describe <u>yourself</u> as you are <u>now.</u>

DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SERIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	FUN-LOVING
D	SUBJECTIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	ANALYTIC
D	FUTURE-ORIENTED	1	2	3	4	5	6	PRESENT-ORIENTED
D	ENERGETIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	RELAXED
D	UNASSUMING	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-ASSERTING
D	LENIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	FIRM
D	RESERVED	1	2	3	4	5	6	EMOTIONALLY EXPRESSIVE
D	DIGNIFIED	1	2	3	4	5	6	CASUAL
D	REALISTIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	IDEALISTIC
D	INTENSE	1	2	3	4	5	6	CALM
D	SKEPTICAL	1	2	3	4	5	6	TRUSTING
D	QUIET	1	2	3	4	5	6	TALKATIVE
D	CULTIVATED	1	2	3	4	5	6	NATURAL

DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SENSITIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	TOUGH-MINDED
D	SELF-SUFFICIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	SOCIABLE
D	STEADY	1	2	3	4	5	6	FLEXIBLE
D	DOMINANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	DEFERENTIAL
D	CAUTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	BOLD
D	UNINHIBITED	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-CONTROLLED
D	CONSCIENTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

Please describe <u>your friend</u> as he or she is <u>now.</u>

DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SERIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	FUN-LOVING
D	SUBJECTIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	ANALYTIC
D	FUTURE-ORIENTED	1	2	3	4	5	6	PRESENT-ORIENTED
D	ENERGETIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	RELAXED
D	UNASSUMING	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-ASSERTING
D	LENIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	FIRM
D	RESERVED	1	2	3	4	5	6	EMOTIONALLY EXPRESSIVE
D	DIGNIFIED	1	2	3	4	5	6	CASUAL
D	REALISTIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	IDEALISTIC
D	INTENSE	1	2	3	4	5	6	CALM
D	SKEPTICAL	1	2	3	4	5	6	TRUSTING
D	QUIET	1	2	3	4	5	6	TALKATIVE
D	CULTIVATED	1	2	3	4	5	6	NATURAL

DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SENSITIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	TOUGH-MINDED
D	SELF-SUFFICIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	SOCIABLE
D	STEADY	1	2	3	4	5	6	FLEXIBLE
D	DOMINANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	DEFERENTIAL
D	CAUTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	BOLD
D	UNINHIBITED	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-CONTROLLED
D	CONSCIENTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

Please describe <u>yourself</u> as you were <u>three years ago.</u>

		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION							
D	SERIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	FUN-LOVING
D	SUBJECTIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	ANALYTIC
D	FUTURE-ORIENTED	1	2	3	4	5	6	PRESENT-ORIENTED
D	ENERGETIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	RELAXED
D	UNASSUMING	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-ASSERTING
D	LENIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	FIRM
D	RESERVED	1	2	3	4	5	6	EMOTIONALLY EXPRESSIVE
D	DIGNIFIED	1	2	3	4	5	6	CASUAL
D	REALISTIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	IDEALISTIC
D	INTENSE	1	2	3	4	5	6	CALM
D	SKEPTICAL	1	2	3	4	5	6	TRUSTING
D	QUIET	1	2	3	4	5	6	TALKATIVE
D	CULTIVATED	1	2	3	4	5	6	NATURAL

DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SENSITIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	TOUGH-MINDED
D	SELF-SUFFICIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	SOCIABLE
D	STEADY	1	2	3	4	5	6	FLEXIBLE
D	DOMINANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	DEFERENTIAL
D	CAUTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	BOLD
D	UNINHIBITED	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-CONTROLLED
D	CONSCIENTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

Please describe <u>your friend</u> as he or she was <u>three years ago.</u>

)EPENDS)N THE ;ITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SERIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	FUN-LOVING
D	SUBJECTIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	ANALYTIC
D	FUTURE-ORIENTED	1	2	3	4	5	6	PRESENT-ORIENTED
D	ENERGETIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	RELAXED
D	UNASSUMING	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-ASSERTING
D	LENIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	FIRM
D	RESERVED	1	2	3	4	5	6	EMOTIONALLY EXPRESSIVE
D	DIGNIFIED	1	2	3	4	5	6	CASUAL
D	REALISTIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	IDEALISTIC
L	INTENSE	1	2	3	4	5	6	CALM
D	SKEPTICAL	1	2	3	4	5	6	TRUSTING
D	QUIET	1	2	3	4	5	6	TALKATIVE
D	CULTIVATED	1	2	3	4	5	6	NATURAL

DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SENSITIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	TOUGH-MINDED
D	SELF-SUFFICIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	SOCIABLE
D	STEADY	1	2	3	4	5	6	FLEXIBLE
D	DOMINANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	DEFERENTIAL
D	CAUTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	BOLD
D	UNINHIBITED	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-CONTROLLED
D	CONSCIENTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

Please describe <u>yourself</u> as you think you will be <u>five years from now.</u>

		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION								
D	SERIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	FUN-LOVING
D	SUBJECTIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	ANALYTIC
D	FUTURE-ORIENTED	1	2	3	4	5	6	PRESENT-ORIENTED
D	ENERGETIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	RELAXED
D	UNASSUMING	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-ASSERTING
D	LENIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	FIRM
D	RESERVED	1	2	3	4	5	6	EMOTIONALLY EXPRESSIVE
D	DIGNIFIED	1	2	3	4	5	6	CASUAL
D	REALISTIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	IDEALISTIC
D	INTENSE	1	2	3	4	5	6	CALM
D	SKEPTICAL	1	2	3	4	5	6	TRUSTING
D	QUIET	1	2	3	4	5	6	TALKATIVE
D	CULTIVATED	1	2	3	4	5	6	NATURAL

DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SENSITIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	TOUGH-MINDED
D	SELF-SUFFICIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	SOCIABLE
D	STEADY	1	2	3	4	5	6	FLEXIBLE
D	DOMINANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	DEFERENTIAL
D	CAUTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	BOLD
D	UNINHIBITED	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-CONTROLLED
D	CONSCIENTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

Please describe <u>your friend</u> as you think he or she will be <u>five years from now.</u>

DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SERIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	FUN-LOVING
D	SUBJECTIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	ANALYTIC
D	FUTURE-ORIENTED	1	2	3	4	5	6	PRESENT-ORIENTED
D	ENERGETIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	RELAXED
D	UNASSUMING	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-ASSERTIVE
D	LENIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	FIRM
D	RESERVED	1	2	3	4	5	6	EMOTIONALLY EXPRESSIVE
D	DIGNIFIED	1	2	3	4	5	6	CASUAL
D	REALISTIC	1	2	3	4	5	6	IDEALISTIC
D	INTENSE	1	2	3	4	5	6	CALM
D	SKEPTICAL	1	2	3	4	5	6	TRUSTING
D	QUIET	1	2	3	4	5	6	TALKATIVE
D	CULTIVATED	1	2	3	4	5	6	NATURAL

DEPENDS ON THE SITUATION		VERY MUCH APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	SOME-WHAT APPLIES	MODERATELY APPLIES	VERY MUCH APPLIES	
D	SENSITIVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	TOUGH-MINDED
D	SELF-SUFFICIENT	1	2	3	4	5	6	SOCIABLE
D	STEADY	1	2	3	4	5	6	FLEXIBLE
D	DOMINANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	DEFERENTIAL
D	CAUTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	BOLD
D	UNINHIBITED	1	2	3	4	5	6	SELF-CONTROLLED
D	CONSCIENTIOUS	1	2	3	4	5	6	HAPPY-GO-LUCKY